

Is there a crisis of democracy in Europe?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the current talk about a crisis of democracy in Europe in the light of some empirical evidence about long-term trends and their articulation in Europe's party systems. It suggests that the crisis talk is largely exaggerated. I present my argument in four steps. To begin with, I adopt the birds' eye view of long-term trends – just to reassure us where we ought to situate the argument in the grand scheme of things. The next three steps, which will be more detailed, focus on Europe. In step two, I adopt the perspective of the citizens and ask whether they adhere to the principles of democracy, and how they evaluate democracy in Europe. In fact, they largely support the principles, but are highly critical of the way they are currently implemented in their own country. In step three, I adopt the perspective of the voters and discuss the rise of populism in Europe. While acknowledging the rise of populism, I suggest that we need to be careful about how to interpret it. In particular, we need to distinguish between two forces on which it builds – the long-term structural change of society and political dissatisfaction. Finally, I turn to the perspective of the elites, i.e. to the question of what happens when populists get into power. I discuss five factors that serve to constrain the threat posed by populists in power – institutional, partisan, international, market constraints and constraints imposed by citizens. My overall assessment of the state of democracy in Europe is that there is reason for concern, but no reason for panic.

Introduction

From the vantage point of the Chinese elites, not only free market capitalism, but also western-style democracy have lost their attraction, and they suggest that '90 per cent of democracies created after the fall of the Soviet Union have now failed' (Wolf 2018). There might be some wishful thinking involved in their assessment of the state of democracy across the globe. But in Europe, too, the democratic 'Zeitgeist' is becoming more pessimistic (Welzel 2017) and the current public debate about democracy builds on the assumption that liberal democracy is in crisis. In Europe, the rise of populism from the right and from the left, the imposition of austerity on southern European countries by the Troika, Brexit and the illiberal measures taken by governments in Hungary and Poland are interpreted by pundits – academics as well as public intellectuals – as so many signs of a crisis of democracy.

The current situation in Europe reminds me of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when preoccupied observers identified ‘a breakdown in consensus,’ ‘a political and economic decline’ and ‘a crisis of democracy’. This crisis talk came basically in two versions (Held 2006): those arguing from the premises of a pluralist theory of politics and those arguing from Marxist theory. According to these theories, the liberal democratic state had become increasingly hamstrung or ineffective, in the face of growing demands, which were either ‘excessive’ (Crozier et al. 1975) or the ‘inevitable result of the contradictions within which the state is enmeshed’ (Offe 1972, Habermas 1973). These theories were later on overtaken by events – the third wave of democratization that swept across the world. They were also disconfirmed by a large research program – the ‘Beliefs in Government program’. This program, which was triggered by the very preoccupations with the alleged democratic crisis, showed that Western representative democracies proved to be perfectly capable of absorbing and assimilating growing pressure from societal problems, and the forms of political expression taken by such pressure could be understood as the normal manifestations of democracy in complex societies. Nevertheless, the question of ‘disaffected democracies’ did not go away. In 2000, a follow-up study was primarily preoccupied by the lack of public confidence in leaders and institutions of democratic governance (Pharr and Putnam 2000). The study argued that the causes for the decline of confidence did not lie in the social fabric, nor were they the result of general economic conditions. The problem, it suggested, was with government and politics themselves. In the same vein, the contributors to yet another study on ‘political disaffection in contemporary democracies’ (Torcal and Montero 2006) highlighted the decisive role of politics and institutions in shaping political disaffection.

If we listen to the contemporary prophets of doom (e.g. Streeck 2011, 2014), we are heading straight for another ‘rationality crisis’ of unknown proportions, which, in turn, is likely to give rise to a ‘legitimation crisis’ as theorized in the old days. I would like to discuss the

current crisis talk in the light of some empirical evidence about long-term trends and their articulation in Europe's party systems that suggests to me that now as then, the crisis talk is largely exaggerated, but that politics does, indeed, play a decisive role for the way democracy evolves. I shall present my argument in four steps, each one of which adopts a different perspective. To begin with, I adopt the *birds' eye view* of the long-term trends – just to reassure us where we ought to situate the argument in the grand scheme of things. The next three steps, which will be more detailed, focus on *Europe*. In step two, I adopt *the perspective of the citizens* and ask whether they adhere to the principles of democracy, and how do they evaluate democracy in Europe? Although I agree with Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018: 19) that the citizens' democratic values do not provide a guarantee for the survival of democracy, I think that such values constitute a necessary condition for democracy's survival, as well as a key constraint of possible relapses into authoritarianism. While people cannot shape at will the government they possess, the governments cannot ignore the will of the people in the long run.

In the next step, I adopt *the perspective of the voters* and discuss the rise of populism in Europe. The 'Zeitgeist' is not only pessimistic about democracy, it is also heavily populist (Mudde 2004). According to a widespread view, populists constitute an increasing threat to liberal democracy (Müller 2016). While acknowledging the rise of populism, I shall suggest that we need to be careful about how to interpret it. In particular, we need to distinguish between the two forces on which it builds – the long-term structural change of society and democratic dissatisfaction. Finally, I shall turn to *the perspective of the elites*, i.e. to the question of what happens when populists get into power. As Norris (2017) has usefully pointed out, consolidation of democracy not only means that the overwhelming majority of people believe that democracy is the best form of government, it also means that all major actors and organs of the state reflect democratic norms and practices and no significant group

actively seeks to overthrow the regime or secede from the state. The question is to what extent this second condition is currently guaranteed in Europe. I shall discuss five factors that serve to constrain the threat posed by populists in power –institutional constraints, partisan, international and market constraints as well as the already mentioned citizens’ constraints. My overall assessment of the state of democracy in Europe is that I perceive dangers, but I do not think there is any reason for panic. As suggested by Galston (2018: 13), I think that ‘the best stance is reality-based concern.’

The birds-eye view: the centennial trends

This is the view of modernization theory and of Steven Pinker (2018: 199-213). The latter presents evidence based on Polity IV-data which show a long-term spread of democracy across the world. He also suggests that the spread of democracy across the globe has contributed to the spread of human rights. A recent survey of the state of democracy across the globe (Van Beek et al. 2018) could not find any signs of democratic backsliding for the established democracies of the West, even if there are various problems in other parts of the world. Based on V-Dem data, Welzel (2017) presents the centennial democratic trends – for democracy overall as well as for its participatory, liberal and electoral components, which all have been rising in the long run (see *Figure 1*). However, according to these data, there is evidence that the long-term trend has stalled since the turn of the millennium and shows some signs of a limited reversal, almost all over the globe.

<Figure 1>

, Modernization theorists such as Inglehart (2016) suggest that democracy has always been and continues to be a *strongly culture-bound phenomenon* and that long-term cultural change will create the conditions for democracy to impose itself. Similarly, while acknowledging that

there have been reversals in the trends of democratization, Welzel (2017) points out that they have been only temporary. He provides reasons for optimism by showing that democracy's cultural seeds – emancipative values – are rising over the generations and are doing so in most parts of the world, including such seeming strongholds of authoritarianism as China, Russia, Singapore and Turkey. What really matters, according to Welzel (2017: 27), 'is the extent to which people's support for democracy is inspired by emancipative values.' And this kind of emancipatory support for democracy is, as he shows, neither in temporal nor generational decline in the most mature democracies, among which we find the Western European democracies.

The popular support for democracy in Europe: a citizens' perspective

Ever since Almond and Verba (1965) and in line with the notion that democracies are ultimately rooted in a supportive culture, political scientists have argued that stable democracies require supportive attitudes and norms: if citizens hold democratic values, democracy will be safe. In search of empirical support for this argument, Claassen (2020) has recently built a unique dataset based on 3'765 national opinions about democracy, obtained from 1'390 nationally representative public opinion surveys, in 150 countries. His analysis confirms that the citizens' support for democracy is robustly linked to the stability of democracy, once it has been established. In adopting the perspective of the European citizens, the pertinent question then becomes whether and to what extent they support liberal democracy today.

There are some voices who have their doubts about the solidity of the citizens' support for democracy today. Thus, in a widely cited recent paper, Foa and Mounk (2016) claim that citizens in Western democracies in general are increasingly turning away from democracy.

They maintain (p. 7) that citizens ‘have become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives.’ Moreover, they claim that younger cohorts are particularly affected by the decline in support for democracy. Their alarmist message is based on an analysis of World Value Survey data.

Now, the first thing to note about their dramatic message is that even according to their own data, we need to distinguish between the US and Europe. While there is a clear decline of support for democracy among younger age groups in the US, the same does not apply to Europe. Thus, in a reaction to their paper, Inglehart (2016: 18) interprets their results largely as ‘a specifically American period effect’. He invokes three points that account for this American effect: the virtual paralysis at the top of the American democracy, massive increases in income inequality, and the disproportionate and growing political influence of billionaires as a result of the extraordinary role played by money in US politics. He points out that existential insecurity undermines democracy, and that existential security has been declining for most of the population in the US – especially among the young. The second point to note is that one has to guard against basic errors when analyzing data such as those used by Foa and Mounk. These errors range from exaggerating by cherry-picking cases and by improper visual presentations of the survey data (Norris 2017), to failing to distinguish generational from life-cycle effects, to neglecting that the composition of the countries in the case of the aggregate data on Europe varies from one survey to the other (Voeten 2017), and to superficial interpretations of the data. Using the World Value Surveys, Voeten (2017) finds some evidence that US millennials have grown somewhat more acceptant of non-democratic alternatives, but he finds no evidence that people in consolidated democracies in general (Western democracies – EU15 members, as well as Canada, US, Norway, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Costa Rica, Cyprus, Japan, Lithuania, Mauritius,

Slovenia, Uruguay), have soured on democracy and have become more likely to accept authoritarian institutions as a way to run their countries.

Using data from the European Social Survey 6 (ESS6), which includes an exceptional set of questions on democracy, I would like to show to what extent the dramatic claims of Foa and Mounk are substantiated by the empirical evidence. Although these data are already somewhat dated – the survey has gone into the field in 2012, I think they still provide the best opportunity to answer the question about the Europeans’ support for and satisfaction with democracy (see Ferrin and Kriesi 2016). To begin with, these data show that *support for the democratic ideal* is alive and well in Europe, even if there are some regional variations. In the ESS6, Europeans were asked how important it was for them ‘to live in a country that was governed democratically’. They could answer on an 11-point scale, where 0 meant not important at all, and 10 meant ‘extremely important’. *Table 1* presents the average responses in five European regions as well as the percentage of respondents who said that it was extremely important for them to live in a democracy. The five regions include the Nordic countries, Continental Europe (including the UK and Ireland), Southern Europe, Central- and Eastern Europe, plus a group of three countries (Russia, Ukraine and Kosovo) that are at best characterized as ‘hybrid democracies’. The latter constitute a benchmark for comparative purposes. As one can see, averages are very high in all the regions. Even in hybrid regimes, they reach appreciable levels. On average, Europeans think that it is rather important to live in a country that is governed democratically. In Nordic countries, a two-thirds majority even thinks that it is extremely important. This share is much lower in other regions, but it is still appreciable in hybrid regimes, where it reaches a bit less than one third (29 percent).

<Table 1>

Based on the ESS6, we can also probe into the detailed understanding of Europeans of democracy, i.e. the extent to which they support the *specific principles of liberal democracy*.

By way of illustration, *Table 2* presents the average importance and the percentage of extremely important responses for two principles of liberal democracy – equality before the law and media freedom. As one can see, the average importance and the shares of citizens who consider the principle of equality before the law extremely important are even higher than the corresponding values for democracy in general, and they are also rather high for media freedom. Strikingly, once we consider specific principles of liberal democracy, there is hardly any variation between the regions. Even in the hybrid democracies, citizens know what it means to live in a democracy. If anything, the exception is now Continental Europe, where the corresponding values are lower than in the other regions. In other words, there is a similar understanding of democracy across Europe. This does not only hold for the aspects I have presented here, but it holds more generally across a larger set of specific principles which, together, form a scale for liberal democracy (see Kriesi et al. 2016). The fact that in some regions specific democratic principles are rated as more (or less) important than democracy overall may refer to region-specific attitudinal differences: possibly, citizens in the Nordic countries and in Continental Europe are generally very supportive of the ideals of democracy in general, but take some specific principles of democracy (such as media freedom) for granted. By contrast, citizens from the other regions, where the quality of democracy is typically lower, may be somewhat less supportive of democracy in the abstract, but when asked about specific principles of democracy, they turn out to be very sensitive to the importance of the specific rights and obligations implied by them, given their past (or current) experiences with authoritarian regimes.

<Table 2>

Now, if the overall support of democracy is still guaranteed, there might still be some lack of support among younger generations, as claimed by Foa and Mounk. In an attempt to replicate their results, I rely on the same general question about the importance of living in a country

that is governed democratically and I also follow their choice to consider only the shares of citizens who believe that it is extremely important to live in a democracy. *Figure 2* presents the shares of the age-cohorts in four out of the five regions (I drop hybrid regimes in this analysis) who believe that it is extremely important to live in a democratic country. As we can see, Foa and Mounk are not entirely wrong: in all four regions, younger cohorts are less enthusiastically embracing the democratic ideal than middle-aged cohorts. However, the relationship is nowhere as strong as in the US, and it is somewhat curvilinear in all regions, i.e. it is not only the younger cohorts, but also the older ones which are less enthusiastic about democracy than the middle-aged. Moreover, the relationship between age groups and democratic support is clearly more pronounced in some regions than in others. While it is quite strong in the Nordic countries, at a comparatively high level of overall support for democratic, it is least pronounced in Central- and Eastern Europe, at a comparatively low overall level of democratic support.

<Figure 2>

In order to provide some meaning to this finding, we need to dig deeper than Foa and Mounk have done. In order to do so, I propose to compare the citizens' democratic expectations with their *evaluations of democracy* in their own country. Before returning to the question of the generational differences, let me introduce the Europeans' evaluations of democracy. The most frequently used indicator for democratic evaluations is based on a general, straightforward question: on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country? Again, the answers vary from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). Although this indicator has its problems, it is a rather good measure of the citizens' assessment of democracy (Ferrin 2016).

Figure 3 presents the development of the share of citizens who are fairly/very satisfied with democracy for three European regions – Northwestern Europe (including the Nordic and the

Continental European countries), Southern Europe and Central- and Eastern Europe – since 2000. On the left, the evaluation of national democracy is presented, on the right the evaluation of democracy at the European level. The vertical line indicates the beginning of the Great Recession in fall 2008. At the national level, we observe dramatic regional differences: in Northwestern Europe, large majorities of the citizens have been fairly/very satisfied with the way democracy works in their country throughout the period covered. The great economic crisis has not changed the overall satisfaction in these countries. By contrast, the level of satisfaction has been much lower in the Central- and Eastern countries throughout 2000s, hovering around one third of the citizens. The economic crisis did not change much in these countries either. There is widespread dissatisfaction of the Central- and Eastern European publics with the way their politics work and a deep-seated disenchantment of citizens with democratic politics. Finally, Southern Europe presents a third pattern, which is distinct from both of the other regions. Most importantly, satisfaction with democracy has dramatically decreased since the onset of the Great Recession and reached the low level of Central- and Eastern European countries by 2013. In Southern Europe, satisfaction with democracy at the EU-level also sharply declined during the Great Recession, whereas it stayed at high levels in both Northwestern and Central- and Eastern Europe. The three key points to be retained are the discrepancy between national and EU-level satisfaction in Central- and Eastern European countries, the stability of democratic satisfaction in Northwestern Europe, and the dramatic decline of both types of satisfaction in Southern Europe.

<Figure 3>

As the data show, there is a *discrepancy between the democratic ideal and the really existing democracies*: European citizens embrace the democratic values and principles, but do not get as much democracy as they would want to have, especially in the Southern and in Eastern

parts of Europe. Some have called this discrepancy the ‘*democratic paradox*’ (Blühorn 2013: 36, 111; Dahl 2000). But there is nothing paradoxical in this discrepancy: in the real world, ideals are difficult to implement, and we are used to getting less than we expect. On average, citizens are aware of the shortcomings of the democracy they encounter in reality, i.e. in the main, their evaluations clearly reflect the country differences in quality (see Kriesi et al 2016a). *Table 3* presents the average expectations (importance) and evaluations (satisfaction) as well as the discrepancy between the two for the same five regions that have already been introduced before. As we can immediately see from *Table 3*, on average, both expectations and satisfaction are higher in the Nordic countries than in the rest of Europe, and both are particularly low in hybrid democracies, i.e. in countries that are not really democracies. We also observe that satisfaction falls short of expectations in all five regions. This is especially the case in Southern Europe, but also in Central- and Eastern Europe and hybrid democracies, while the average discrepancies are smaller in Continental and Northern Europe. But even in the Nordic countries there is room for improvement.

<Table 3>

Where does the citizens’ democratic dissatisfaction come from? Arguably, democratic dissatisfaction has its origin in a crisis of representation.

The rise of the populists in Europe: a voters’ perspective

In the third step, I now adopt the perspective of the voters. Even if they stick to the democratic ideals, the dissatisfaction with the way democracy works does have consequences for the voting behavior of Europeans. Thus, many studies have found a relationship between political discontent and abstention (Bélanger and Nadeau 2005, Gabriel 2015, Hetherington

1999), as well as between political discontent and voting for populist parties (e.g. Betz 1994, Lubbers and Scheepers 2000, Lubbers et al. 2002, Mayer and Perrineau 1992, Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013, Swyngedouw 2001). There are *two forces at work here*: on the one hand, there are the *structural transformations of society* which create new societal conflicts, and which are at the origin of a set of new demands to be represented in the political system. On the other hand, there are the *political dynamics*, especially those within the party system, which create the supply-side conditions for the representation of these demands within the political system. Arguably, the discontent with democracy is the result of the tension between these two sets of forces.

More specifically, the *tension between the political representatives* ('the elites') and the *voters* ('the people') stems from the fact that the established mainstream parties have not been able/ready to represent some of the rising new major demands in society. For some time party scholars have been pointing out the weakening of the representative function of established parties – their increasing remoteness from their constituencies, their programmatic convergence and the decline of their mobilizing capacity (see Mair 2013). Contemporary critical observers like Mounk (2018: 58ff.) insist on the increasing remoteness of the political elites from their constituencies. According to Mounk's argument, they have insulated themselves from popular views to a remarkable extent. The legislature, once the most important political organ, has lost much of its power to courts, bureaucrats, central banks, and to international treaties and organizations. Meanwhile, the people who make up the legislature have in many countries become less and less similar to the people they are meant to represent (Bovens and Wille 2017). Even in areas where parliaments retain real power, they do a bad job of translating the views of ordinary people into public policy (Gilens and Page 2014, for European countries: Persson and Gilljam 2017, Schakel and van der Pas 2017, Elsässer et al. 2017). Other critical observers like Blühdorn (2013) insist on the

convergence of mainstream elites, which is, in their view the result of system imperatives which do no longer allow for democratic politics at all. TINA – ‘there is no alternative’ – the technocratic logic of the mainstream parties’ discourse is taken literally by this kind of critics, and they conclude that democratic politics as we knew them are no longer possible. According to this perspective, the position of democratic optimists is untenable and suffers from a ‘democratic self-delusion’ (Blühorn 2013: 109).

However, both the arguments about the increasing remoteness of mainstream parties and the functionalist arguments of those who reason with the unavoidable constraints of system imperatives overlook the fact that there, indeed, are alternatives in the party system in particular (here I do not discuss other alternatives, such as mobilization of protests in the streets and online). Thus, the decline of the mainstream parties’ capacity to represent the key societal conflicts has made room for *the rise of new challengers in the party system* who not only articulate these new conflicts, but who also turn more explicitly against the established political elites that constitute their direct adversaries in the electoral competition. Mair (2002: 88) has already pointed to the link between, on the one hand, the weakening of party democracy as we knew it and, on the other hand, the rise of such new challengers. The rise of these new challengers in the European party systems is a sign that the system imperatives may not be that overwhelming after all. *Figure 5* presents the trends for the rise of radical left and radical right parties in Northwestern Europe, i.e. presents the respective regional averages for four five year periods – two preceding the onset of the Great Recession and two following the fall of Lehman Brothers in fall 2008. This deceptively simple graph makes two assumptions, which I need to point out. First of all, it excludes all countries, where the radical right or the radical left has not participated in any significant way in the national elections (this excludes Iceland, Ireland and Luxemburg in NWE, and all but two countries (Italy and Greece) in SE for the calculations of the averages for the radical right and Switzerland, the UK and Malta

for those of the radical left). Including these countries would heavily reduce the trends indicated. The second assumption is that M5S can be considered as a radical left party. Of course, M5S considers itself ‘neither left nor right’, and most observers would not range it among the radical left. However, even if not a party on the radical left, it is nevertheless the functional equivalent of the radical left in Italy. Having clarified this, the graph has a very clear message: it is above all in Southern Europe that the Great economic crisis boosted the rise of radical challengers – mainly from the left, but also from the right in Italy and Greece. In Northwestern Europe, the radical left stagnated throughout the more recent past, while the radical right benefited from the economic crisis, but also from the more recent refugee crisis.

<Figure 5>

The new challengers pursue a double logic (Rooduijn et al. 2016: 34): on the one hand, they express the substantive concerns and the democratic dissatisfaction of the voters in question, while on the other hand, they also contribute to their voters’ discontent by their populist rhetoric which claims that the established elites are betraying the people and that the sovereignty of the people ought to be restored. Accordingly, based on Dutch panel data, Rooduijn et al. (2016) find a reciprocal reinforcement of democratic discontent and populist voting. Similarly, based on Belgian panel data, Hooghe and Dassonneville (2018: 126) observe a ‘spiral of distrust’, where low levels and decreasing levels of political trust increase the probability of voting for a populist party, while having chosen such a party increases distrust even further. Without panel data, I cannot show the reciprocal effect of the two logics of discontent, but I can show that both, substantive concerns and democratic discontent contribute to the vote for radical right and radical left challengers at any given moment, and I can also document how the two forces interact in contributing to the vote for these challengers.

As for the substantive concerns, we know from the literature that radical right challengers mainly mobilize citizens who are concerned about immigration, cultural liberalism and European integration while radical left challengers mainly mobilize citizens concerned about economic and social policy (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015, Oesch and Rennwald 2018). In addition to an indicator each for opposition to immigration and support for redistribution to take into account the substantive concerns of the respective voters, I distinguish between two types of democratic dissatisfaction:

- General dissatisfaction with democracy: a factor that is based on three components – dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in one’s own country, dissatisfaction with one’s government and distrust in the national political institutions, all three of which load roughly equally on the common factor.
- Dissatisfaction with government responsiveness: This indicator attempts to operationalize what has been called the ‘thin’ populist ideology. It taps into the populist notion that the people should be sovereign and that the politicians ought to follow the will of the people. The question on which it is based asks whether government should change its planned policies to what most people think or whether it should stick to planned policies regardless of what most people think. The dissatisfaction measure is a balance measure (for such measures see Wessels 2016, Hernandez 2018), which takes the difference between the respondent’s expectation and evaluation with respect to government responsiveness, weighted by the expectation . Given its close relationship to populist ideology, this indicator is an attempt to operationalize what we might call ‘populist’ dissatisfaction.

I also assume that radical right parties are generally rather populist, while I do not think this applies to the same extent to the radical left parties. In their case, March (2011) has singled out only two parties within the larger group of modern democratic socialist parties that he

calls populist – the German ‘Linke’ and the Dutch SP. I shall distinguish them from the other radical left parties. In addition, I shall also distinguish between radical right or radical left parties in opposition and those which are in government. In the case of the radical right parties, only the Swiss People’s Party has been in government at the time of the interviews in 2012, while two of the radical left parties – the Cypriot AKEL and the Icelandic Left-green movement – have been part of the government at the time. The expectation is that democratic discontent is above all important for the voters of those radical parties which have adopted a populist ideology and/or are in the opposition.

Figure 6 presents the findings with regard to respective relevance of cultural/economic preferences and democratic dissatisfaction for the radical right and the radical left vote in Europe. The figure presents the average marginal effects of the respective determinants of the vote (controls for social-demographic characteristics, some other political preferences, as well as country-fixed effects are not shown). The effect parameters have been estimated with logit regressions and refer to the vote for these parties as compared to the vote for mainstream parties. The right-hand panel in this figure refers to the radical right. It shows that both anti-immigration concerns and democratic discontent play an important role for the radical right vote. However, there is an important difference between Switzerland, where the radical right was in government at the time of the interviews and all the other countries. While in Switzerland anti-immigration concerns are even more important for the vote for this party than in the other countries, general dissatisfaction with democracy does not play a role. On the other hand, dissatisfaction with government responsiveness is much more important in Switzerland than in the other countries. While the Swiss who vote for the Swiss People’s Party are generally no less satisfied with Swiss democracy and the Swiss government, and no less distrustful of political institutions than the voters of the mainstream parties, they are much more dissatisfied with the government’s responsiveness, i.e. their ‘populist’

dissatisfaction is much greater. Most likely, this is a result of the fact that key popular initiatives dealing with the immigration issue which have been adopted in a popular vote, have not been implemented to the letter by the government (where the members of the Swiss People's Party have been outvoted by their coalition partners on several relevant occasions). Thus, at the time the ESS6 went into the field, the Swiss public was intensely debating the implementation of the so called 'deportation initiative', which had been adopted in a popular vote in November 2010. It proved to be very difficult to implement without violating the freedom of movement principle enshrined in the Bilateral Treaties with the EU, and it was already obvious that the majority of the mainstream parties was trying to do everything to save the Bilateral Treaties at the price of fudging the implementation of the initiative that represented the popular will.

<Figure 6>

The left-hand panel of *Figure 6* shows the corresponding results for the radical left. The results are largely similar to those for the radical right. Thus, both substantive concerns (in this case pro-redistribution preferences) and democratic discontent increase the vote for the radical left. The corresponding effects are somewhat smaller for the radical left than for the radical right, which may have a lot to do with the fact that the indicator for the substantive concerns here is weaker (i.e. based on just one item that has, moreover, little variance) than the anti-immigration indicator that we have used above (and which is based on a list of items that form a strong factor). Democratic dissatisfaction also contributes to the vote for the radical left: the effect of general dissatisfaction is significant for all radical left parties in opposition, while the effect for 'populist' dissatisfaction with government responsiveness is smaller and significant only for the populist parties among them. The voters of radical left parties in government are, in fact, even more satisfied with democracy in general than the voters of the mainstream parties in their respective countries. Contrary to the voters of the

Swiss People's Party, radical left voters whose party is part of the government are not distinct from mainstream voters with respect to their dissatisfaction with government responsiveness.

We can go one step further in this analysis and observe how the substantive concerns interact with democratic dissatisfaction. *Figure 7* presents the results for the radical right. The results for the radical left are largely analogous, although less pronounced. First of all, we observe that the effect of anti-immigration attitudes and general dissatisfaction are largely cumulative, if the radical right is in opposition: at each level of the anti-immigration attitude, democratic dissatisfaction increases the likelihood of the vote for the radical right. If both reach a maximum, the likelihood to vote for the radical right reaches almost 40 percent. In the case of Switzerland, with the radical right in government, general dissatisfaction does not make much of a difference. To the extent that it does, it even attenuates the vote for the radical right. But the anti-immigration attitude has a massive effect: at its maximum, the probability to vote for the Swiss People's Party reaches almost 70 percent, whether one trusts the government or not. Turning to the effect of dissatisfaction with government responsiveness, in countries where the radical right is in the opposition, this 'populist' dissatisfaction somewhat increases the probability to vote for the radical right for voters who are not strongly opposed to immigration. In the Swiss case, however, it has a massive effect at all levels of anti-immigration attitudes. At the maximum combination of opposition to immigration and discontent with the government's responsiveness, the likelihood to vote for the SVP reaches more than 80 percent!

<Figure 7>

To conclude this analysis, I propose to have a brief look at the determinants of the vote for the Italian M5S. In Italy, the ESS6 went into the field in 2013, after the February elections which saw the first break-through of this highly populist 'movement-party'. M5S claimed to be 'neither left nor right'. Its main demand was to throw the established parties (the 'casta')

out of office. As we can see from *Figure 8*, none of the cultural and economic preferences played a significant role for the M5S vote. With the exception of the level of education, the same can be said for all the social-structural indicators. Only the little educated had a significantly higher probability to vote for M5S than for mainstream parties. The only determinant that played a key role for the vote for M5S was general democratic dissatisfaction. And, as the second part of *Figure 8* shows, this effect was, indeed massive: while those who were not dissatisfied with Italian democracy did not vote at all for M5S, more than half of the most highly dissatisfied voted for M5S. I have tried to find regional differences for the determination of the 2013 vote, but could not find any. Nor could I find any interaction between level of education and democratic dissatisfaction. In this pure case of a populist party, which at the time of its break-through in 2013 did not campaign on any substantive programmatic point but focused on its anti-elitist message, democratic dissatisfaction becomes the overpowering factor in determining the vote. This is contrary to the already more established parties of the radical right and radical left, for whom, as we have seen, democratic dissatisfaction determines the vote in combination with more structural demands related to long-term changes in society.

<Figure 8>

Whatever their faults, and there are many as is well known, the populist parties' 'professed aim is to cash in democracy's promise of power to the people' (Canovan 1999: 2). As Canovan has pointed out, it is this promise of the 'redemptive face' of democracy which creates the tension with its pragmatic face and with liberalism. Populism is both a 'politics of resentment' (Betz 1993) – a response of the weak to the wrongdoing of the powerful – and a 'politics of hope' (Akkerman et al. 2017: 380) that 'yearns for a more direct and unmediated relationship between citizens and their political representatives'. Mair (2013) has conceptualized the discrepancy between the 'redemptive' and the 'pragmatic' face of democracy as the

tension between ‘responsibility’ and ‘responsiveness’: while the mainstream parties emphasize responsibility to a complex set of stakeholders, the challenger parties from left and right emphasize responsiveness to the voters. Distrust of the political elites and dissatisfaction with the lack of responsiveness, and the lack of unmediated direct democracy are likely to be the fuel that drives the surge of these challengers – or at least of the more populist among them. Although critical of these parties, Mounk (2018: 52) does acknowledge the democratic energy of populism and he suggests that the refusal to do so will stop us from understanding the nature of their appeal.

We can go even one step further: as Rovira-Kaltwasser (2012) as well as Taggart and Rovira-Kaltwasser (2016: 346) have argued, populism can work as a *democratic corrective*.

Populists may develop a corrective force especially when they represent demands and claims of structurally important groups which have been neglected or ‘depoliticized’ by the established mainstream parties, i.e. if they hold out the promise of ‘salvation through politics’ for unrepresented sectors of society. As such a corrective force, they may bring back into democratic politics groups of the population that have been left unrepresented by the mainstream parties in the past. Thus, as a result of their mobilization, electoral participation may increase, as has happened in the last German regional and national elections, and as has happened in the British Brexit referendum. Moreover, populist mobilization may also constitute a ‘*productive force*’ by *setting the key conflicts of contemporary society on the agenda of democratic politics*. As Galston (2018: 14) points out, the Brexit vote ultimately pivoted on policy concerns. In systems where liberal-democratic institutions are strong, disputes about trade, immigration, and even national sovereignty can still take place. In the long run, the effort to place such issues beyond the pale of political contestation will do more to weaken liberal democracy than robust debate ever could.

Populists in power: an elite perspective

Populism is, of course, not only a corrective of democracy it is also a danger for democracy. The danger, however, emanates less from the citizens than from the elites. On the one hand, it stems from the populist leaders, on the other hand from the way the other members of the political elite react to successful populists. Let us first have a look at the populists themselves. As Urbinati (2014) suggests, populism is ultimately more than a ‘thin’ ideology. It requires both, an ‘organic polarizing ideology’ and a leader who mobilizes the masses in order to govern in the name of ‘the people’. Combined, the two elements amount to a *project of political renewal* that seeks ‘to redress democracy by taking it back to its ‘natural’ roots’ (p. 151). Although it starts as a phenomenon of mass discontent and participation, populism is at the same time also ‘strategic politics of elite transformation and authority creation’ (p. 157). The populist leader uses polarization between ‘the people’ and the elite in order to create the unity of the people that is at the core of populist beliefs and in order to implement the specific populist, illiberal, vision of democracy.

When populists are in opposition, they have to forge an electoral majority that will enable them to rise to power. But, as Pappas (2018: 195) observes, once they pass from opposition to power, they face an altogether different task – ‘they have to serve their people, lest the populist electoral alliance be shattered’. Pappas summarizes the inner logic of their rule as ‘state seizure and institution bending’, ‘political patronage’ and ‘uncompromising polarization’. Based on the experience of two Latin American countries (Peron’s Argentina and Chavez’ Venezuela) as well as two European countries (Pasok’s Greece and Orban’s Hungary), Pappas observes that *state seizure* consists in state colonization by loyalists, empowering the executive at the expense of the other branches of state power, the emasculating of checks and balances, the control over the media, the judiciary and the educational system, and ultimately, in regime change. The populists’ *political economy* has

been analyzed by Dornbusch and Edwards (1991) based on Latin American cases. Pappas concludes that the main ingredients of populist economics are: expansive macroeconomic measures, nationalizations of chunks of the economy, as well as radical redistribution of income in favor of the populists' own constituents, which in turn creates patron-client networks. This explosive mixture, which is perfectly illustrated by the economic program of the populist government that just took office in Italy, is bound to lead to economic difficulties, even to economic collapse. The uncompromising *polarization* in words and deeds has not been elaborated by Pappas, but the example of Trump indicates how unrelenting norm breaking contributes to polarization. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018: 193) have observed, even if Trump does not directly dismantle democratic institutions, his norm breaking is almost certain to corrode them. Schedler (2018) suggests that the central lesson of Trump concerns the weight of political language. Trump's most severe democratic norm violations have been discursive and, Schedler argues, Trump's public discourse is what is dangerous about him. From in-depth case studies, we know that discursive transgressions tend to spill over into behavioral transgressions and that both tend to unfold in vicious spirals (Bermeo 2003).

How far populists in power will get in implementing anything like the agenda sketched by Pappas depends very much on a set of constraints that I would like to briefly discuss. First there is the *constitutional constraint*. In the US, Donald Trump has already (to some extent) been checked by the courts and by Congress. The institutional arrangements in the US, but also in the democracies of Western Europe are likely to inhibit the more extreme forms of populist autocracies that we know from the Presidential systems of Latin America (Roberts 2017). In the less established democracies of Central- and Eastern Europe, however, populists in power meet with less institutional resistance and use their power to implement illiberal institutional reforms, as is illustrated by the Polish and Hungarian populists in power. The

same applies to Berlusconi's governments in Italy, which have often adopted illiberal measures regarding the checks and balances of Italian democracy (such as media freedom, the judiciary, the Constitution, and the President of the Republic) (Bobba and McDonnell 2015).

The *electoral system* provides a little noticed, but crucial institutional constraint. While *majoritarian* (or nearly majoritarian) systems allow populists to gain power undivided, *proportional* systems are likely to force populists to share power with coalition partners who are likely to be mainstream parties. This kind of power sharing goes a long way to moderate both populist parties as well as their voters as we have seen above. Thus, when the Austrian FPÖ entered the government dominated by Wolfgang Schüssel's ÖVP in 2000, it was seriously weakened by the experience. Its cabinet members adopted more moderate positions, which led to the collapse of the party's vote share and to an eventual split between the moderates and the radicals with the moderates creating a new party, the BZÖ (Luther 2015: 143-5). Similarly, the Swiss SVP moderated its populist discourse once its leader was coopted into the government in 2003, and it also split over the government experience of its leader (Bernhard et al. 2015). Rooduijn et al. (2014) show that, after an electoral success, populist parties generally become less populist in their party programs. The long-term Swiss experience confirms this conclusion: a study covering the period from World War II up to the present shows that new parties generally tend to be populist when they enter the party competition, but that they tend to moderate their discourse as they age (Weber 2017).

It is when populists gain power undivided and get an opportunity to implement their project of political renewal that they may become a major threat for democracy. In such less favorable institutional circumstances, the strategies of the populists' own *parties* and of related parties in their own camp become particularly important. Thus, for Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018: 7), an essential test for democracies is not whether such populist leaders

emerge but ‘whether political leaders, and especially political parties, work to prevent them from gaining power in the first place’. They are afraid that institutions – written constitutions and norms of mutual toleration and forbearance (i.e. patient self-restraint) are not enough to rein in elected autocrats. For them (p. 19), parties are the essential gatekeepers. Successful gatekeeping requires that mainstream parties isolate and defeat extremist forces. It is ‘the abdication of political responsibility by existing leaders’ which often marks a nation’s first step toward authoritarianism.

In this respect it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of Linz’s (1978) analysis of the breakdown of democracy in the interwar period: he distinguished between loyal, semi-loyal and disloyal oppositions in democratic regimes. Fascists and communists were the disloyal oppositions, but interesting from the contemporary point of view are the *semi-loyal opponents* from less radical parties: Linz characterized them as willing to encourage, tolerate, cover up, treat leniently, excuse, or justify actions of other participants in the political process that go beyond the limits of peaceful, legitimate patterns of politics in democracy. Ultimately, he identified semi-loyalty by its greater affinity for radicals on its own side of the political spectrum than for the supporters of the democratic principles. Thus, in the Weimar Republic, the semi-loyal opposition contributed to the breakdown of the system by seeking the support of the disloyal opposition and by helping it into power. Building on Linz’s analysis, I would like to suggest that the politicians of the populist leaders’ own party and of related parties in their own camp become critical for his or her maneuvering space. To the extent that they condone the excesses of the maverick in power, they crucially contribute to the danger he or she poses for democracy. This is what has happened, tragically, in the U.S., where most Republican leaders closed ranks behind Trump and the election became a standard two-party race (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 70, 201). Trump’s deviance has been tolerated by the Republican Party, which has helped make it acceptable to much of the Republican electorate.

And by spring 2018, Trump's takeover of the party's institutions has been largely complete (The Economist, April 19, 2018).

The third constraint is the *international* constraint. Following Levitsky and Way (2010), external leverage and linkage may be key factors for keeping in check populists in power. However, the recent survey of a number of key cases of populists' in power suggests that 'international actors do have a difficult time when it comes to dealing with populists in power (Taggart and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2016: 356). This is related to the fact that international institutions such as the EU or the Organization of American States have a limited toolkit for defending democracy. In the case of the EU, membership is conditional on meeting several democratic conditions. However, once a country has become a member, the EU has limited capacity to impose compliance with democratic rules and procedures. This has been illustrated by the so called 'Haider Affair', which deeply traumatized the EU (Müller 2013: 139). It is equally illustrated by the way the EU has been dealing with Orban's Hungary and Kaczynski's Poland. Moreover, as Taggart and Rovira-Kaltwasser (2016: 356) suggest, outside interventions may backfire, as they give populists in government the opportunity to denounce coalitions between domestic and foreign actors that undermine the will of the people. This is perfectly illustrated by the Greek referendum in 2015, when the Greek voters turned down the austerity package offered by the international actors, although they were under great pressure to accept it.

A fourth constraint is the constraint imposed by the *markets*. Thus, during the final phase of the recent, protracted Italian government formation, the markets reacted sharply when the leaders of the two populist parties submitted a list of prospective ministers to the President that included a finance minister who was an explicit opponent of Italy's membership in the Eurozone. *Figure 9* illustrates this reaction of the bond-market, where the two-year yield on Italian government bonds jumped from 0.27 to 2.72 percent over three trading days at the

height of the negotiations between the President and the two populist leaders. When the latter backed down and were prepared to compromise, the markets calmed down to some extent, although it remains to be seen how they will react to the economic policies once the new government is attempting to implement them. The sanctioning potential of the markets seems to be much bigger than that of international actors.

<Figure 9>

Finally, the most important constraint is constituted by the voters. Aspiring despots may be beaten at the polls. Of course, it is by no means certain that voters will vote against populists in power. As Schedler (2018) points out, it has been quite puzzling and disturbing ‘to see majorities (or at least pluralities) of voters supporting, once and again, illiberal governments who have been, step by step, dismantling their democratic rights and liberties’. Schedler suggests that voters might care more about other values (such as social justice, religious piety, or the national soul) than democracy, or they may fail to see that democracy is taken apart before their eyes, or they may have competing conceptions of democracy. However, it is possible that voters unseat aspiring autocrats. *Armenia* and *Malaysia* provide two recent examples. In April 2018, a protest movement succeeded in ousting Serzh Sargasyan, who has ruled Armenia for the past decade, and in replacing him with Nikol Pashinian, a journalist turned lawmaker. Meanwhile, in Malaysia’s general elections in early May 2018, a broad coalition of voters ousted Prime Minister Najib in spite of shameless attempts of the latter to rig the elections and hold on to power. Malaysia’s citizens have finally been able to reassert their right to change the way the country is run. In the case of Malaysia, the sentiments reflect ‘less a revolution than a restoration’ – a return to an earlier era of settled law, fair judges and democratic accountability that has survived in the national imagination (The Economist, May 17, 2018). Let us not forget that liberal democracy is strong, because, as Galston (2018)

suggests, to a greater extent than any other political form, it harbors *the power of self-correction*.

Conclusion

There clearly are dangers for democracy, but let us underscore with Galston (2018) a less fashionable point: this is no time for panic. As we have seen, modernization theorists concur. They believe that democracy, in the long-run, will impose itself. The long-term trends support their point of view, even if we find some short-term limited reversal of the long-term progress of democracy. In Europe in particular, there is no reason to dramatize. Among the European citizens, the principles of democracy are widely supported, even if dissatisfaction with democracy is widespread – especially in the European South and the European East. In these regions we find large groups of critical citizens who combine support of democratic ideals with dissatisfaction with the really existing democracy of their own countries.

However, we also found a lot of indifference among the youngest and older groups of citizens in Northwestern Europe, and a lot of alienation among the youngest and the oldest in Southern Europe. Even if the critical citizens predominate, the widespread indifference and alienation in different parts of Europe is preoccupying.

Democratic dissatisfaction contributes to the rise of radical challenger parties especially on the radical left in Southern Europe, but also on the radical right across Western Europe. These parties express the widespread dissatisfaction with democracy and contribute to it by their populist discourse. The good news is, however, that once these parties are in government, democratic dissatisfaction seems to evaporate among their voters and they arguably become parties like any other mainstream party, *provided they are not gaining power undivided*. Most dangerous are situations where populists do not have to share power in govern-

ment. In Western Europe, parliamentary democracies and proportional electoral systems tend to guard against populists gaining undivided power, although the Italian case now shows that populists of different persuasions may join forces to govern. It remains to be seen how far populists of different persuasions can effectively implement a joint project of political renewal. The institutional context is less favorable for democracy in Central- and Eastern Europe, where semi-presidential systems (Poland, Romania) and electoral systems heavily skewed in favor of the largest party (Hungary) provide the possibility for populists to gain undivided power. Other safeguards – partisan, international, and market constraints – may be less reliable than often hoped for. In the final analysis, it is the voters who may resort to sanctioning aspiring authoritarians.

Let us not forget that, in the case of established democracies, populists may be a sign of vitality rather than a sign of decline of democracy. As Berman (2017) has argued, illiberal democracy is certainly worrying, but it has often proven to be a stage on the route to liberal democracy rather than the endpoint of a country's political trajectory. She bases her argument on historical illustrations from France (the cradle of illiberal democracy), Prussia, Italy, Britain and the US. Her point is that limiting democracy is not the best way to defend liberalism. If democracy without liberalism is dangerous, the same can be said of liberalism without democracy. It leads to oligarchy and technocracy, which is likely over time to support populism. I agree with her that technocracy and populism are evil political twins, each feeding off and intensifying the other and both putting democracy in danger. But in the final analysis, populism appears to be the lesser danger, since it is building on the promises of democracy.

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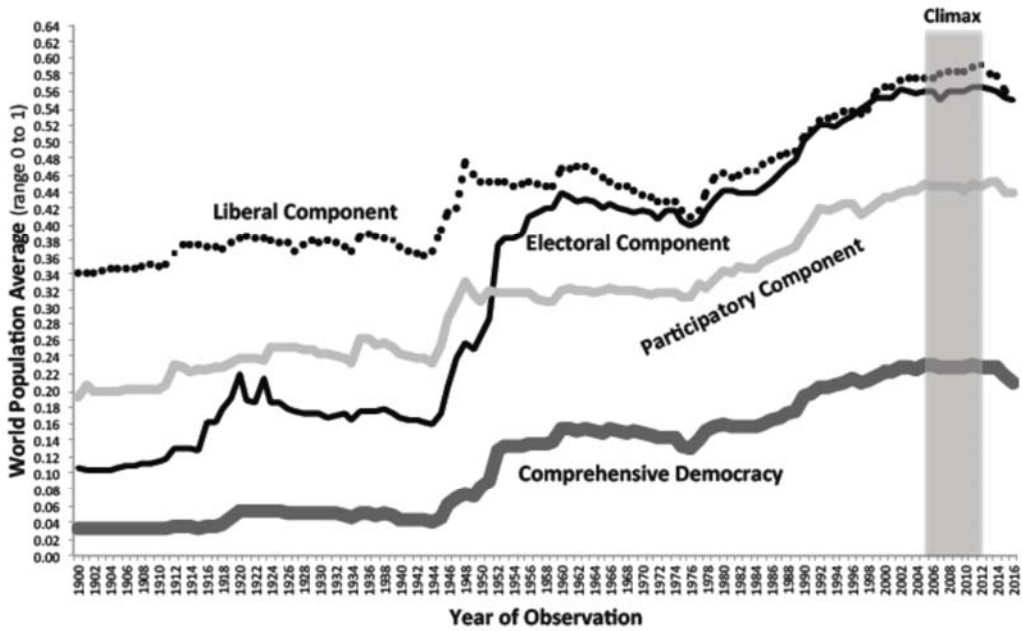
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Figure 1: The Centennial Democratic Trend (global democracy averages)



Note: Data are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (www.v-dem.net) and cover between 85 (in 1900) and 175 countries (in 2016). To calculate yearly global averages, we weight countries for the size of their population. Comprehensive Democracy is the product of V-Dem's Electoral, Participatory and Liberal Components.

Source: Welzel, Christian 2017. A tale of culture-bound regime evolution: the centennial democratic trend and its recent reversal, University of Gothenburg, The Varieties of Democracy Institute, Users Working Paper, Series 2017: 11, p. 7

Table 1: Importance of living in a country that is a democracy

European region	importance (average, 10-point scale)	extreme importance (percentage of 10= extremely important)
Northern Europe	9.2	65
Continental Europe	8.5	46
Southern Europe	8.6	49
Central- and Eastern hybrid democracies	8.1	40
Total	8.4	45

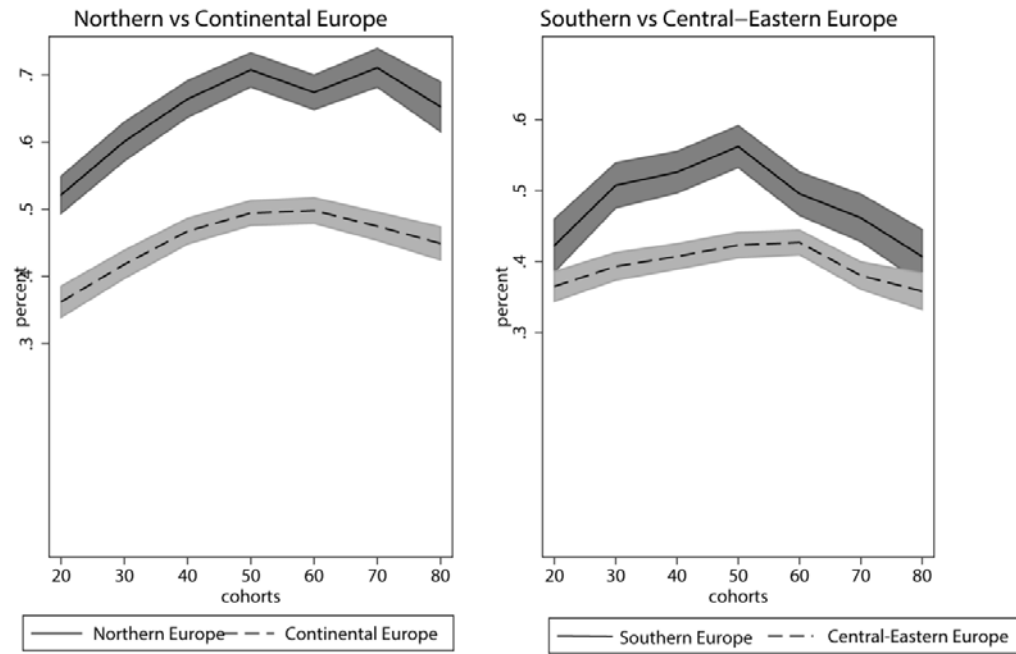
Source: ESS6

Table 2: Importance for democracy that courts treat everyone the same/that media are free to criticize the government

European region	equality before the law		free media	
	importance (average, 10-point scale)	extreme importance (percentage of 10= extremely important)	importance (average, 10-point scale)	extreme importance (percentage of 10= extremely important)
Northern Europe	9.5	77	8.4	42
Continental Europe	9.1	63	7.8	32
Southern Europe	9.3	71	8.3	45
Central- and Eastern E. hybrid regimes	9.1	69	8.4	48
Total	9.2	69	8.2	42

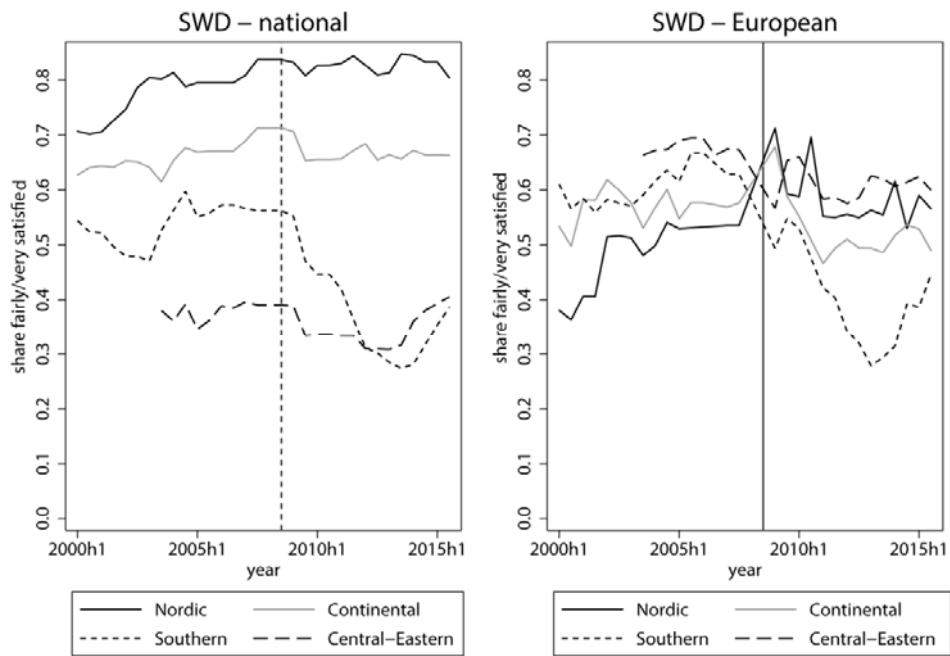
Source: ESS6

Figure 2: 'Extremely important' to live in a democratic country by age cohort and region



Source: ESS6

Figure 3: Satisfaction with the way democracy works in one's own country/at the European level



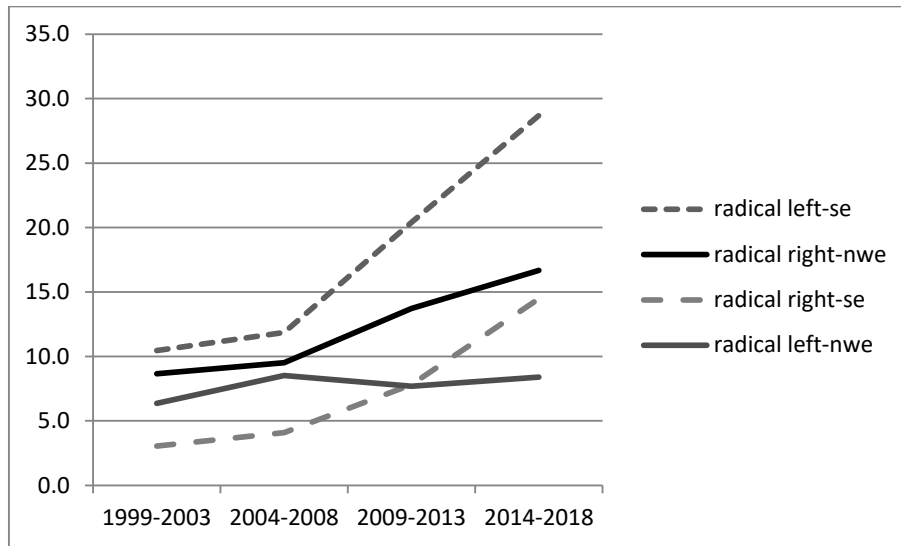
Source: Eurobarometer

Table 3: average expectations (importance) of democracy and evaluations (satisfaction) of democracy, and the discrepancy between the two, by European region

European region	democracy in general		
	importance	satisfaction	discrepancy
Northern Europe	9.2	7.0	-2.2
Continental Europe	8.5	5.9	-2.6
Southern Europe	8.6	4.2	-4.4
Central- and Eastern E.	8.1	4.4	-3.7
Hybrid democracies	7.3	3.6	-3.7
Total	8.4	5.1	-3.3

Source: ESS6

Figure 5: development of vote share of radical right/radical left in Northwestern and Southern Europe



Source: own calculations

Figure 6: effects of cultural/economic preferences and democratic dissatisfaction on vote for radical right/radical left

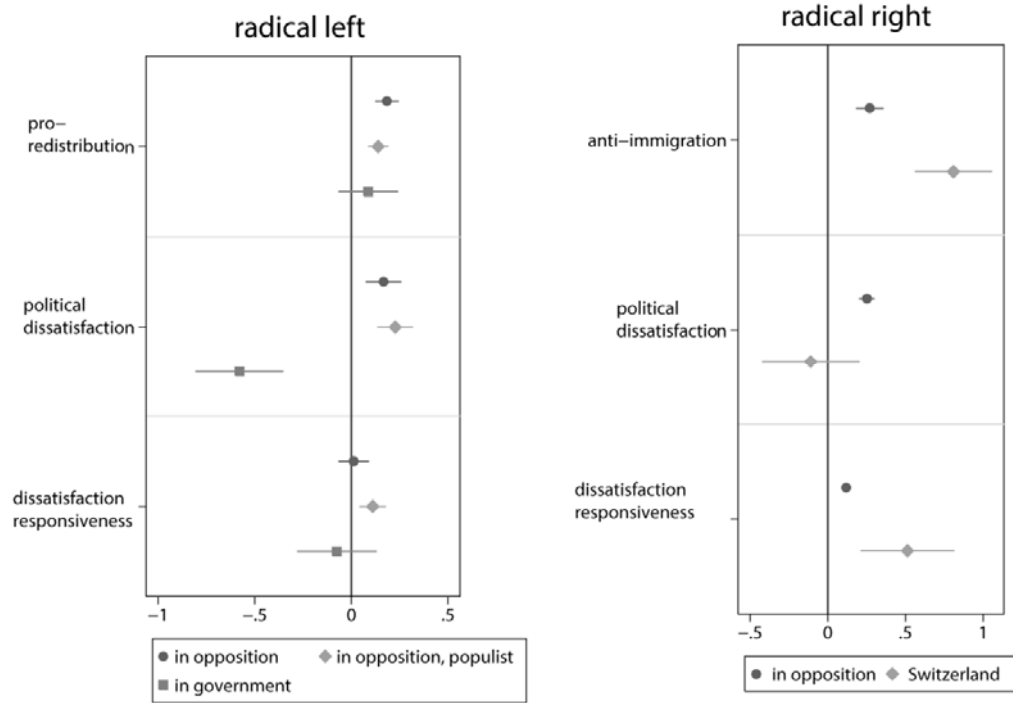


Figure 7: combined effects of cultural/economic preferences and democratic dissatisfaction on vote for radical right

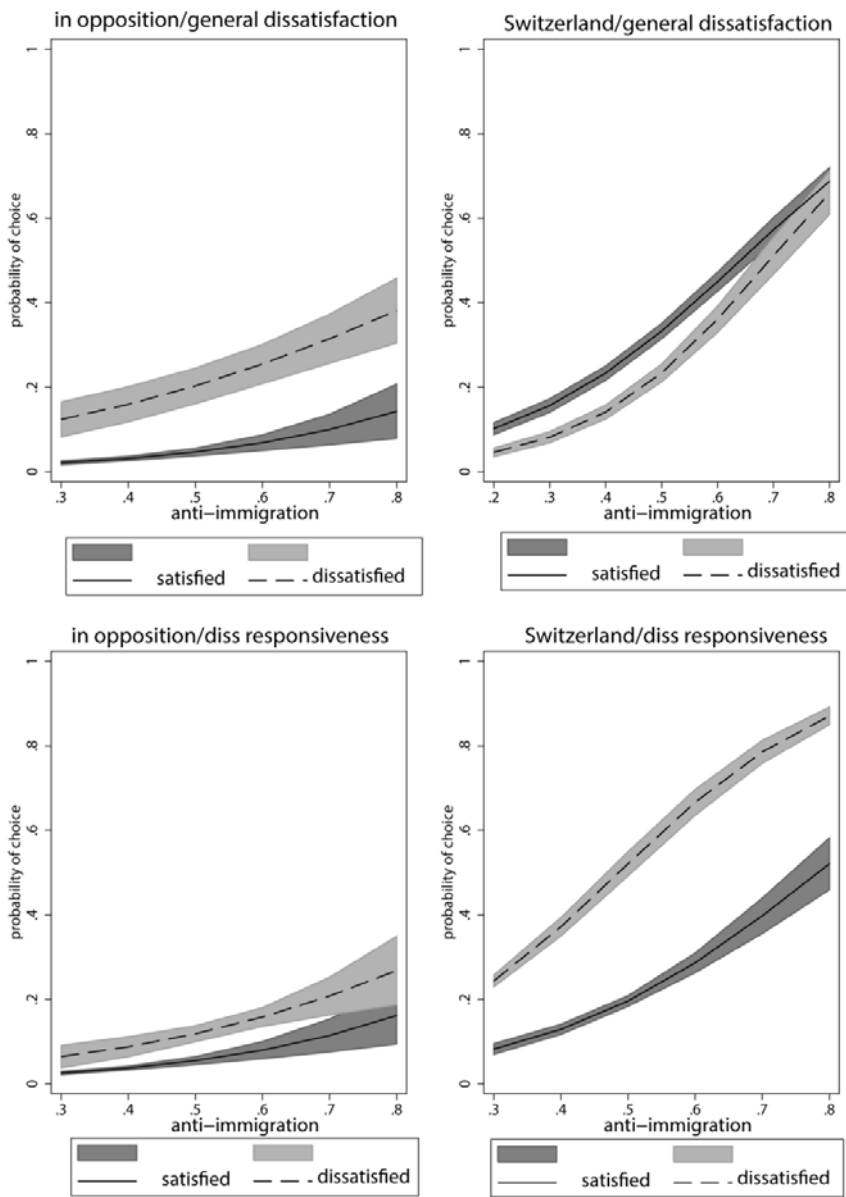


Figure 8: effects of cultural/economic preferences and democratic dissatisfaction on vote for m5s

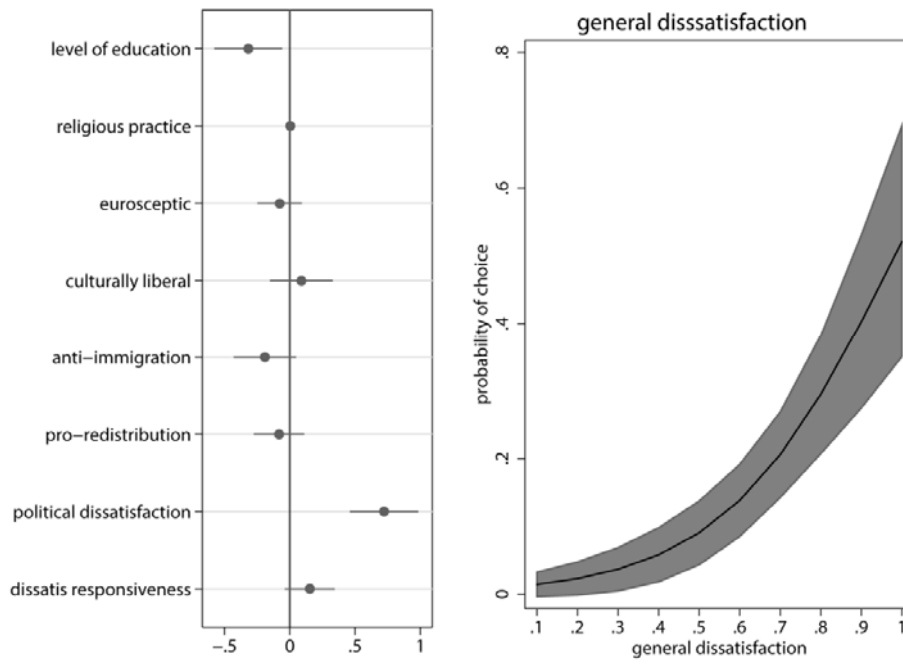


Figure 9: Spread of 2-year Italian bond yield over German Bunds: percentage points



Source: FT, Italy gives complacent investors a lesson in stark political risks, 30/5/2018